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CHAPTER TWO

THE MURIA'S LIVELIHOOD

I. The Muria Village

BEFORE approaching the main subject of this book, it is necessary to see how the chelik and motiari live at home. In a sense, there is no such thing as a typical Muria village any more than there is a typical Muria house. But most of the villages conform to the Gond pattern: they are set among trees—the Muria seem fonder of shade than wind and do not often choose the hill-tops beloved of the Maria and Baiga—and each house is enclosed within a separate fence that also surrounds its garden. There is thus a sharp distinction between a Muria and a Hill Maria village: the latter, like the Baiga village, consists of a row of houses joined together and opening on to a common street. Traces of this survive among the Muria in the enclosures of some of their leading men; at Markabera, for example, the headman's house is like a little village, a long enclosure with a small street on to which face many dwelling-places and granaries. In Palli-Barkot and other western villages also, groups of related families build their houses to open round a square.

But generally the houses are scattered about, sometimes widely scattered, to suit the lie of the land and the dimensions of the gardens, and a street connects them with each other. There is no sociological significance in the layout of the village; neither the headman's nor the priest's houses nor the ghotul are ever in a special or recognized position.

The houses, nearly always two or three in number round a small courtyard, are built of timber or bamboo plastered with mud and have thatched roofs. As we move east we find the verandahs getting deeper and deeper until in the east of Kondagaon the verandah of the main house is often deeper than the room inside. Where houses are built like this, there is no need for special menstruation huts, which are indeed only to be found in the west in the neighbourhood of the Abujhmar, where there is no room to seclude a woman on the small verandahs.

To visit a Muria village is to receive a general impression of tidiness and cleanness, careful industry that exploits to the full the gifts of Mother Earth, and a love of animals. The pigsties are substantial, often with a double roof; the cattle-sheds are sometimes raised on pillars; sitting hens are given comfortable nests raised well above the ground. The houses themselves are cosy and homely, crammed with every sort of basket, leaf-bundle and utensil. Fish-traps, drums, wooden clogs hang from the roof, and flutes and bows and arrows are stuck under the thatch. Inside, in an inner room, is kept the mysterious Pot of the Departed where the family's ancestors are tended and placated.

These houses are the work-rooms of the chelik and motiari; they are the homes only of the married. The life and interest of chelik and motiari centre in the ghotul. But life there is definitely regarded as a preparation and training for the home. Those who live well and work hard in the dormitories will be good husbands and wives, fathers and mothers later on.

Most of the Muria are undoubtedly very poor. I was one day discussing with W. V. Grigson, who had visited Mandla after several years in Bastar, whether the Bastar villagers were poorer than those in the Central Provinces. I suggested—and he agreed—that probably the Bastar villagers were actually poorer, but that their lives were so much richer that they seemed far more

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511 prosperous than their fellows in a district like Mandla. In Mandla, for example, or Bilaspur, the worst poverty is the poverty of the spirit, the decay of art and culture, the disappearance of tribal religion, the dying-out of dance and song. Against this background, material want stands out stark and bare. But the Muria of Bastar has a full rich life; every day brings its delightful and absorbing pursuits; at least twice a month there is a sharp break in the monotony, the colour and music of a festival, the excitement of a hunt, the romance of a dancing expedition—and all the time, if you are young, there is the ghotul which you would not exchange for any offer of material wealth.

II. Cultivation

241 'It is as bad for a Muria to fail in his cultivation as for a monkey to slip from a branch,' but it is not necessary to spend very much time on this subject, important as it is. The axe-cultivation of the Maria, which closely resembles that of the Muria, has been fully discussed by Grigson,[1] and for its wider implications my own account of bewar in *The Baiga* may be consulted.[2] The Muria's permanent rice-cultivation hardly differs from that elsewhere in India and need not be described in detail.

For the sake of completeness, however, and because we must never forget that the ghotul exists in a setting of agriculture, food-gathering and hunting, I will give a brief outline of the Muria's methods of cultivation.

There are three kinds of axe-cultivation and the Muria practise them all, for 'the axe is our milk-giving cow':

1. *Penda* is cut on the steep slopes of hills. The Muria fells the trees and undergrowth, fires them when dry, and sows his seed in the ashes after the first rains have fallen. In a *penda* clearing there is no digging or ploughing of the earth. After two or three years a *penda* plot is abandoned and a new clearing made. This is the most common form of axe-cultivation among the Hill Maria: it is the bewar of the Baiga. No plough or hoe is used. For beans and pulses, holes are dibbled with a primitive digging-stick.

2. *Dippa*, also called *marhān* and *erka*, differs from *penda* in three ways—

   (*a*) The clearings are made on fairly level ground, not on the side of hills.

   (*b*) After the fellings have been fired the ashes are evenly distributed over the whole area; in a *penda* clearing no one bothers to do this. The result is a much more even and regular crop.

   (*c*) When the rains fall, the ashes are ploughed into the ground, or dug into it with a hoe, and only then is the seed sown.

3. *Parka* or *dahi* differs again: in *dippa* and *penda* clearings, the trees are felled in the very place where it is desired to sow. They are burnt on the spot. But in *parka*, trees and brushwood are cut elsewhere and are carried on to an already existing field. Here they are spread over the field and fired. After raking the ashes evenly over the field, the Muria plough them into the ground and sow their seed.

[1] Grigson, op. cit., pp. 123–30.
[2] Verrier Elwin, *The Baiga* (London, 1939), pp. 100–31.